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Letter dated 14 August 2002 from the Permanent Representative of Cyprus to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Upon instructions from my Government, I wish to bring to your attention the unacceptable imprisonment of two prominent Turkish Cypriot journalists, Sener Levent, editor-in-chief of the Turkish Cypriot daily *Afrika* (formerly *Avrupa*) and Memduh Ener, editor of the same paper, for purportedly defamatory articles published in their paper. On 8 August, an illegal court in the Turkish occupied part found Sener Levent and Memduh Ener "guilty" of "libel" against Mr. Denktash, the occupation army and Turkey in connection with an article Mr. Ener wrote on 29 July 1999 and imposed on each of them a six-month "jail sentence". The imprisonment of the two journalists follows a series of harassment acts by the illegal regime against this newspaper and its journalists. Mr. Levent and Mr. Ener provoked the wrath of the occupying power and Mr. Denktash because they advocated a peaceful settlement of the Cyprus problem, expressed support for Cyprus' accession to the European Union and noted the fact that the Turkish Cypriot leader is not participating in the direct talks in good faith.

This latest act, which is contrary to international law and conventions that affirm the freedom of speech and expression, is the culmination of threats and acts of intimidation by the illegal regime against Turkish Cypriots who disagree with Turkey's policy in Cyprus and have the courage to challenge publicly Turkey's military presence on the island and Mr. Denktash's negative approach to the Cyprus problem. The imprisonment of journalists is part of a well-known systematic policy of the occupying power and its subordinate local administration, which aims at eliminating any critical point of view coming from the Turkish Cypriots that supports the idea of a reunited Cyprus, free of occupation troops and a member of the European Union.

Many international organizations and human rights advocates both in Cyprus and abroad as well as Turkish Cypriot political party leaders, non-governmental

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organizations and newspapers immediately condemned the sentencing and expressed their strong opposition to it, demanding at the same time the immediate release of the two journalists. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists issued a media alert on 9 August, protesting the sentencing, stating that "The harassment of *Avrupa* (*Africa*) intensified at the end of 2001 amidst Denktash's negotiations with Greek Cypriot leaders and international officials about reuniting the Mediterranean island, which has been divided since Turkey invaded the northern half in 1974." Similar statements were issued by other international organizations, such as the Reporters sans frontières, the International Federation of Journalists and the European Federation of Journalists. In its annual report, entitled "The Annual Survey of Press Freedom 2002", Freedom House, a human rights foundation based in New York, states that the Turkish Cypriot leadership "harassed the press increasingly, raiding and shutting down the opposition paper *Avrupa*.

The bitter truth is that since direct negotiations started in January 2002, under your auspices, to solve the Cyprus problem based on Security Council resolutions, there is deterioration in the situation of human rights in the occupied part and an attempt by the illegal regime to prevent bicommunal activities, as well as an intensification of the harassment of the press.

Freedom of the press is a fundamental human right and the United Nations honours this right at a special observance day on 3 May. World Press Freedom Day exists to recognize the sacrifices made in the struggle for freedom of the press and to send out the message that journalists everywhere must be granted the right to report freely and without fear. We believe that no political expediency is served by keeping silent on such an unacceptable situation affecting the rights and freedoms of the individual. In view of this negative development, I appeal to you to exercise your influence upon Turkey in order to put pressure on Mr. Denktash to release Mr. Levent and Mr. Ener immediately and finally to stop the harassment of the Turkish Cypriots for daring to voice opinions contrary to those of the illegal regime.

I should be grateful if the text of the present letter could be circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda items 119 (a) and (b), and conveyed to all human rights mechanisms.

(*Signed*) Sotirios **Zackheos**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative